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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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## THE INJURIOUS EFFECTS OF OVER-EDUCATION.

BY EDITH ESCOMBE.

*Read at The Women's Conference of The Sanitary Congress,  
August, 1899.*

At the present time, when the question of education occupies so prominent a place in modern thought and legislation; when old systems are being superseded by new, and later hypotheses are replacing discarded ideals; when the education of children has become a subject of contention as well as a matter of serious thought and consideration: it is surely precisely now that it were wise to pause and consider whereto so much education is tending, and to ask, with all earnestness, "Is it well with the child?"

At five years, and frequently as early as three years of age, the child is taken from his playtime and shut up indoors. The room where he is taught may be lofty, spacious, airy, but that does not alter the fact that for five hours in the day he is a prisoner from open out-door life. During those five hours he is taught a good deal of what is useful and a good deal of what is useless. His unnatural sedentary position is varied by physical drill, and there is a certain amount of necessary movement consequent on the changing of classes. The work amongst—so-called—infants is, as often as not, mere play, whilst the enforced discipline is undoubtedly beneficial.

At the same time no room, however spacious, can favourably compare with the open air; no set regulation drill can be as advantageous as the natural, unstudied movements of children at play. Work, however judiciously chosen, and however well regulated, must always—to children—be more or less of a toil. As the hours pass his animation gives place to boredom, he gets dull, cross, vacant, and has to be goaded into giving his attention, and then come tears. The child at play is a different creature, alert, full of life and spirit. He is never still, and when tired out with this

perpetual movement he is sure to throw himself down and rest, and will usually drop off to sleep. At school he may not rest nor sleep, and with the effort to keep awake and pay attention comes the first strain on his system.

At the age of seven years the hitherto infant is, according to the Elementary Code, recognised as a child—girl or boy—and enters school at the lowest form, to be worked up according to routine through the various standards till he be permitted to discontinue his attendance. During these five or six years—years that are valuable in building up his physical growth—he is steadily crammed to qualify him to pass creditably the periodical inspections made by recognised inspectors. Prizes are offered to induce him to attend regularly, in order that he may do credit to his school and secure the Government grant. Besides the five or five and a half hours he is at school, he has further tasks set him for home work. If specially intelligent he is offered the post of pupil teacher, when besides teaching in class hours he has in addition the preparation of his own work, to be done when he can spare the time. Fortunately the majority of children leave the elementary school at the age of thirteen years.

With another class of children, however, it is precisely at this age that they are submitted to a more severe course of cramming. The boy destined for the navy must pass his entrance examination. The crammer, who cuts open the child's knuckles on the edge of a desk, is no inhuman task-master; he is rather the boy's best friend, in that he is enabling him to successfully pass his examination. Extra army-classes at the public schools keeps the future soldier from the playing-fields, whilst anxiety to obtain exhibitions and scholarships wins for another boy the scorn of his companions and the opprobrious term of "smug." With girls it is for the most part all work, and if they be later destined to teach, they must first toil to take their degree, and later wear themselves out in teaching others.

School days are succeeded by student-life. It is no longer the school but circumstance, that impels the man to give his best energies and sacrifice his vitality to the acquisition of such knowledge as shall make him able to hold his own in the warfare of competition. And so he works into

the early hours of the morning, exciting his flagging powers and dulling faculties with stimulants. Now and again he breaks down before the culminating examination, or he may obtain the enviable degree for which he sacrificed his health to end his days in a lunatic asylum, or he quietly passes from college life into mediocrity and oblivion.

There was in a recent issue of a weekly paper a comparison drawn between the rules and regulations of Macadam and the making of a macadamized road. Macadam's directions were—that all stones used in road-making should be broken so small that none of the pieces, in any of their measurements, exceeded an inch. He also directed that no substance should be used for binding purposes, as the ordinary wear of the roads would force the small stones together into a firm compact whole. In making a macadamized road to-day, large stones of unequal size are thrown over a hard surface, and over these stones is spread a mixture of gravel and sand in order to make the stones bind; lastly, a steam-roller grinds down the preparation. This description will serve as an analogy to illustrate the theory and practice of modern education.

The theory is admirable: everything that could be desired. A well-proportioned measure of physical, mental and moral training. Well-designed buildings: rooms allowing of so many cubic feet of air to each child. Sufficiently spacious play-grounds, to allow of children moving without touching each other; a judicious arrangement of work to suit the capacities of the average child; special arrangements for defective children; classes adapted to the requirements of each child at the different stages of its development. A teacher who fully understands child-nature and human-nature, and who is prepared "to use all reasonable care in the ordinary management of the school, to bring up the children in habits of good manners and language, of cheerful obedience to duty, of consideration and respect for others, and of honour and truthfulness in word and act." (*Code.*)

But to leave theory and come to practice, what is the actual state of affairs as far as the child is concerned?

Dr. More Madden, Physician to St. Joseph's Hospital, Dublin, said, "from his twenty years' experience of children's diseases, of late years there was an increase of nervous

disease in childhood, and this he attributed to school over-pressure. With this Sir Charles Cameron agreed."

Dr. Sir James Crichton-Browne, in an essay on "Education and the Nerve System," says, "the dulness and simplicity induced by over-pressure upon young minds may amount to a pathological condition. Thus the late Sir Henry Holland said: 'In the course of my practice I have seen striking and melancholy instances of the exhaustion of the youthful mind by the over-exercise of its faculties. In two of these . . . the torpor of mind approached almost to imbecility.' But the evil effect of memory stuffing and brain forcing . . . are not confined to mental failure, . . . they include a whole train of physical diseases."

Dr. Clement Dukes, in an address delivered before the Incorporated Association of Head-masters, at their general meeting this year, said: "As a nation, we have taken enormous strides in recent years in the mental education of our young—strides too often, in my opinion, in excess of brain capacity, and consequently to the serious detriment of brain development—but we have frequently forgotten, in our partial attention, the well-being of the child as a *whole*; his future is sacrificed to present pressure."

Dr. G. E. Shuttleworth, in his paper, "Mental Overstrain in Education," says: "Unfortunately, bright, precocious children are not unfrequently the offspring of a neurotic stock, and it is just these that are likely to break down under emotional excitement and the pressure of an examination. From all I have been able to gather from teachers and from the children's hospitals in London, it would seem that it is this class that nowadays furnish cases of school headache, of chorea, and other nervous affections, more particularly about the periods of examination."

Besides such strong medical evidence, everyone who has taught, or had anything to do with children, can corroborate these statements from personal experience. I lately heard from the mother of a boy attending the elementary infant school, that every night during preparation for the recent Diocesan Scripture Examination, she and her husband had to sit up with the child and pacify him in order to get him to sleep. Can this be wondered at, when an inspector asks of infants such questions as, "What is conscience?" following

it up with, "What do we mean by the Trinity; and what is the work of the three persons?" Fortunately on this occasion the teacher interfered by saying she had not taught the children the answers to either of the questions, and that she should herself require some time to give a definition.

Everyone who has taught knows the weariness that comes upon children with the prolonged strain of merely paying attention, apart from actual brain-work. Teachers see and know the meaning of the dull vacant look that comes over the faces of children; but they cannot, on this account, stop work. And so they continue to grind on as inexorably as any iron factory wheels—

"Grinding life down from its mark."

To pass from infants to older children it is the same tale intensified, for the older child has become imbued with the importance of his work and is further troubled with a nervous anxiety to do his best, and this anxiety—according to several medical authorities—is held to be more injurious than the actual brain-work expected of children. The child is anxious to distinguish himself, anxious to please his teacher, and, in some instances, anxious to escape punishment. This anxiety creates a nervous excitement resulting in "sleeplessness, giddiness, loss of appetite with consequent wasting." Not long ago a mother told me of the trouble she had with her daughter, a girl of thirteen, attending one of the North London High Schools; that constantly the child would lie awake for hours crying for no reason beyond tiredness and an inability to sleep.

At the Académie de Medicine M. Gustave Lagneau called attention to the intellectual over-pressure to which boys are subjected at the Lycées. M.M. Ernest Martin, Béard, Charcot, Heurot, have found a "considerable number" of students of the École Polytechnique, Normal Supérieure, etc., suffer serious effects of mental strain, short-sight (myopia), dyspepsia, phthisis and nervous exhaustion, followed, "in many cases," by impairment of the intellectual powers. In condemning the curriculum, particularly of St. Cyr, M. Lagneau said that a large number of students leave school with worn-out brains, and find themselves at the age of thirty-five or forty incapable of intellectual effort.

The very position of children at work is usually bad. A tall child will be seen bending over a low desk that to the child next to him may be so high as to induce a constrained attitude tending to produce curvature of the spine. In many cases the light is wrongly diffused or insufficient in quantity, necessitating an additional strain on the child's eyes, resulting in myopia and the need for glasses. M. Dujardin Baumetz, "who had been twenty years physician to l'École Normal d'élèves Institutrice de la Seine, said that nearly all the young girls there, as a result of pressure of work, besides presenting a general pitiable appearance, had local defects, such as scholarly deformity of the collar-bone, high shoulders, and error of refraction."

In the case of the student, the question of over-education reaches its culminating point. The period of childhood and its irresponsibility has passed. The student has reached the time when he works with a definite aim in view, the result of which probably involves his whole future career. The playing fields are behind him, before him lies his profession. Many a splendidly made, healthy, athletic young fellow is lost to the army because unable to pass the enforced competitive examination, whilst the undersized, physically insignificant student stands well up in the list to fall a ready victim to effects of climate and disease. A schoolmaster, who proudly told of one of his boys having headed the list of naval cadets, heard, within a short time, of the same boy having to leave the service on account of brain failure. Owing to the number of Indian Civil Service Cadets failing to pass the medical examination, the medical now precedes the Cooper's Hill entrance examination.

With girls the over-pressure is yet more significant and more insidious. Dr. Withers Moore, President of the British Medical Congress of Brighton, has insisted that intellectual over-pressure for young girls, particularly for governesses, is more serious than in the case of young men, hence the proportion of governesses who become insane is far greater than that of any other class of society.

Whilst from time to time cases of suicide point to overstrained nerves and general breakdown, not to mention neurosis, anaemia, and other lesser ills, neuralgia, hysteria, sleeplessness, or sopor, a want of pluck and general apathy.

It is, however, by results that all work should be judged. Soon after the passing of the Reform Act, in 1832, the State took an active part in education, steadily increasing the control as time passed ; and what is the result ? A restless, dissatisfied people ; men and women who have learnt to despise their natural surroundings and to look upon manual labour as derogatory. Unsuitable education has tended to draw the sons and daughters of agricultural labourers into towns, where they seek engagements as ill-paid clerks, office hands, shop assistants, in preference to taking situations as domestic servants, labourers, or apprentices. Education has created a desire for reading that seeks gratification in cheap papers, periodicals, and unhealthy sensational publications. Instead of raising man to a fuller consciousness of true manliness, or woman to a deeper reverence of her womanhood, this over-education is tending to demoralize both men and women, by puffing them up with false ideas of greatness and success. The over-education of a class that is not ready to assimilate what is forced upon it, has been the means of vulgarising a hitherto simple and honest people. The following of indoor instead of outdoor occupations is producing a physically inferior race of men and women—nervous, morbid, spectacled, anaemic. The continued flocking to the towns serves to increase the terrible strain for mere existence. “The latter half of the present century has witnessed such a tremendous revolution in moral, social and physical dynamics . . . . that the common people stand appalled at the tremendous upheaval of modern times . . . . and new conditions have arisen to which they are as yet strangers. Is it any wonder that many weakly vitalized brains should fail to adjust themselves to such an altered environment, and succumb to circumstances which they are powerless to control ?”

The education that turns out the finest men and women is the best education. And in this respect English public schools, as far as boys are concerned, stand ahead of all other schools. They do not send out the best informed, but they send out the best type of man. “They,” said Lord Rosebery in his speech at Epsom College, “have been the best schools of manhood that the world has ever seen, and I for one put all the studies of the science and classics,

mathematics, in a secondary position.” Dr. Hill, of Downton, speaking at University College School, deprecated the premium which the present generation places on precocity. He said “that the craving for unreasonable and unseasonable learning in many important schools amounted almost to a vice. He considered that the system of education by scholarship was most unsatisfactory, for it inevitably singled out boys with early developed brains.” Dr. Fletcher Beach, alluding to the prevention of insanity in childhood, says, “that to strengthen the body first is the main point, and having laid a good foundation we can then proceed to educate the mind ; but in many cases the opposite view has been held, and children’s minds have been pushed on with no regard to their physical condition, and insanity—a severe nervous disease is the result.” He states that he sees children of this kind every year.

The theory of an equal education for all is a false idea. The education that trains children to fill, as men and women, those positions in life which circumstance has destined for them, is a wise and far-seeing education ; that includes alike physical, mental and moral progress. A State education, that by technical and manual education prepared its children for emigration and fitted them to take up life successfully in the country’s colonies, would be doing a saner, worthier work than the education that overworks the brains of its children, unfitting them for the only life that is within their reach. “Seven thousand boys and girls in the district of London alone go out on life without a really fair chance. Their physique is weakened, their intelligence dwarfed, their originality and adaptability almost wholly destroyed by the terrible routine system adopted in our gigantic pauper schools.”

Neither greatness or genius are the outcome of education ; “humanity has progressed solely by self-instruction ;” and it were well to realise with Sir William Hamilton that “all true education is *growth*, and what we grow to be concerns us more than what we live to know.”